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ABSTRACT

Based on a principal's firsthand experiences, this paper summarizes the "turnaround" strategy that converted a disorderly and drug-infested Atlanta (Georgia) high school to a productive learning environment characterized by improved academic performance, a revamped core curriculum, and high expectations and behavior standards. This principal began by informing staff, students, and parents of his limited repertoire of competencies as master teacher, administrator, and parent to his own child. He also listed his incompetencies as lawyer, policeman, judge, social worker, physician, nurse, and parent to children other than his own. Educators can no longer claim competency in areas other than instruction and school counseling. Although school staff must be knowledgeable about community resources to help resolve youth-related problems, the schools cannot be expected to police, parent, judge, nurse, motivate, and simultaneously deliver high quality educational services. Clearly stated expectations precede desired change. Once expectations were published in Northside High School's teacher and student handbooks, the consequences for compliance or noncompliance could be administered fairly to children of both the influential and the powerless. Police were called in drug possession cases, and parents became more knowledgeable and responsive concerning drugs, teens, and use of available community resources. (MLH)

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IMPLEMENTING CHANGE WITH STAFF, PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

William J. Rudolph

Northside High School is an Atlanta Public School with approximately 1400 students in grades nine through twelve. The population is a heterogeneous social, racial, and economic mixture of students coming from all parts of the city. Their parents' incomes vary from those of the indigent to those of great wealth. All of the traditional Judeo-Christian religions are represented as well as the non-traditional religious cults. There is a sizeable and vocal group of independent thinkers and atheists.

I consider the diversity of our student body a strength of our institution and a resource from which to learn. Therefore, it is important for our philosophy to recognize this strength. To that end our philosophy might be summed up simply: "To maximize achievement in an environment of mutual respect."

The demographics of Northside High School have not changed much in the past ten years. The student body in 1977, the year I arrived, was as diverse as it is today; however, there have been many other changes during this time. I found that this diverse group of people were experiencing many problems, problems emanating from the lack of structure and from ambiguously stated expectations. In addition to a general student apathy, students were also experiencing major behavioral and academic problems.

Academically, students were following the national trends of declining S.A.T. and achievement scores. The students were also opting to take easy courses, to avoid the difficult ones, and to graduate with the minimum number of credits the State would allow. A

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full 80% of the student body graduated with the minimum academic requirements. They also opted to take electives in lieu of core curriculum when possible. Northside High School had seven physical education teachers and only a part-time calculus and physics teacher.

I called this approach to graduation the "cafeteria style curriculum." Students were not taking any liver and onions as they went through the curriculum cafeteria, but they did load up on French fries, desserts, and milk shakes.

While students chose the easiest way to graduate, they also chose not to get involved in student campus life. An admission-free dance was given by the student government in 1978. In attendance were the band, chaperons, and only one student. Only a small percentage of students participated in extracurricular activities, and it was even difficult to field a full complement of athletes to compete in many of the interscholastic sporting teams that we had.

Poor academic performance and student apathy were also accompanied by major discipline problems of tardies to class, class cutting, and open drug use on campus.

Tardiness and class cutting were monitored, and it was found that we were experiencing over 5,000 tardies per day. Potential tardines, was calculated by taking the enrollment of 1400 and then multiplying it by 7 (number of class changes). That product is approximately 10,000 opportunities to be tardy per day. Our observations and data noted 5,000 to 6,000 tardies per day.

Class cutting was so common it was impossible to keep up with the volume. At lunch time, for example, we could only account for about 300 students.

Within this permissive environment we also found a great deal

of drug use. Students were openly smoking marijuana on campus. Angel dust, Quaaludes, alcohol and cocaine, to name a few, were also being dealt and used during the school day. The day of my arrival, marijuana smoke filled the third floor hallway. A few weeks later a group of students crowded into the air circulator and vents and blew marijuana smoke into the system, it is speculated, in order to "turn the whole school on." That same year a marijuana plant was grown in a hanging basket in the school library. In short, we had drug-related incidents almost on a daily basis.

Since 1977, many changes have occurred in all of the areas just discussed. Our academic record has improved significantly. The students of Northside High School have had seven consecutive years of statistically significant increases in achievement scores on standardized tests, and they have had increased S.A.T. scores for the past nine years.

Students are no longer permitted to take minimum graduation requirements without parental permission, which is usually not granted to the potential college student. In fact, 80% of our students graduate with far more than the minimum required by the State of Georgia.

Elective course offerings have been reduced to a minimum as evidenced by our having only two physical education teachers. The emphasis is on the core academic curriculum; and when students were required to select curriculum with more core, we had a 300% increase in physics enrollment. We also have nearly 60% of our students enrolled in one of the five foreign languages that are offered. In short, the school raised its academic expectations, was clear about it, and the parents and students responded.

Students have also responded to our challenge to get involved in school. Student participation in extracurricular activities has increased tremendously. Our dances routinely are attended by 300-400 pupils, and recently 1600 young people showed up for a drug-free rock concert given at Northside High School.

This increased participation has also been extended to our athletic program, which is one of the most competitive from sport to sport and season to season of any in the city. In fact, we now offer more levels of competition in different sports than any other public school in the metropolitan Atlanta area.

In addition to increased involvement in school and better academic performance, our students have also improved their behavior and have met behavior standards in order to have an orderly academic environment. They get to class on time as we only have about 50-75 tardies per day. They also do not cut class very often, and the administration can account for all pupils throughout the day. The use and possession of drugs on campus have all but disappeared. In the 1985-86 school term we had only two minor drug-related incidents in 1984-85, only three and in 1983-84, only two.

Northside High School has made a great deal of progress, and it is how we got from point "A" to point "B" that we will now examine. The process of implementing change at Northside High School was rather simple! While the process was simple, it was extremely difficult and the labor was intensive. The process was implemented within a philosophical context which requires elaboration and explanation before the process itself can have meaning.

For at least two decades American educators have been looked upon more and more frequently to assist in solving all youth-related

problems. Teachers have been asked to be social workers, nurses, policemen, judges and surrogate parents as well as a host of other roles as needed. The school and specifically public school teachers have been asked in the last years to participate in solving society's social, economic, medical, and educational problems.

Schools are expected to have the solutions to integration, unwed teenage mothers, truancy and delinquency. They also must provide counseling, psychological and psychometric services, leisure time activities, post high school opportunities, and even hold parents accountable for having their children properly immunized against contagious diseases. While educators have been adding to their repertoire of skills and responsibilities they have become "Jacks of all trades and Masters of none." Rather than admitting that we cannot be competent in all these areas, we have accepted the challenge in a humanistic spirit, and as a result our energies have been diverted, dispersed, diluted and dissipated. We now find that we do all things either poorly or, at best, with mediocrity; and unfortunately, this includes what we used to do best----teaching.

While we have increased our responsibilities, we also have done it for less and less compensation and have been maligned and abused by students, parents, taxpayers and legislators.

In 1977, I made it clear to staff, parents, and students alike that I had a limited set of competencies. They were as a master teacher, administrator, and parent to one child--my own. I also shared my areas of incompetence. To name a few, I am an incompetent lawyer, policeman, judge, social worker, physician, surgeon, nurse, parent to children other than my own, ad infinitum.

The point here is that educators can no longer pretend to be

competent in areas other than instruction and school counseling. While we must be knowledgeable of the resources in our communities that can help youngsters with problems, we cannot be expected to solve all of them. Educators should be held accountable for instruction; and when other services are needed, they can serve at best as a referral agency. We can no longer police, parent, judge, nurse, motivate, immunize, and deliver quality educational services at the same time.

The process that was used to implement change was, then, in the context of a competent educator, but one who would not dilute his or her effectiveness by purporting to solve all of the "other" problems dumped on schools.

The process is predicated on the notion that clearly stated expectations must precede desired change. The expectation must not necessarily be agreed upon, only complied with. Once the expectation is clearly stated, that is, understood by the person(s) for whom one has the expectation, it must be confirmed that the message intended is the one received. To that end, student and teacher handbooks were written and published and have been revised and published every year since 1977.

Once the expectations are clear, then consequences for meeting or not meeting stated expectations must be determined. They should be appropriate and reinforce the desired behavioral expectation.

The last part of the process is that of fairly and equitably administering the consequences. When consequences for inappropriate or appropriate behavior are administered, it must be done so as to guarantee fairness. Arbitrary criteria must not be used when consequences are administered. To do so would undermine the deep

sense of justice that our youth have come to feel and expect.

By arbitrary criteria, I mean factors unrelated to the circumstance of not meeting a particular expectation. For example, the most widely abused arbitrary criteria are power and wealth. Also widely used are race, religion, ethnic origin, and color of one's skin. Arbitrary criteria are employed to try to influence the administration of consequences. Far too many parents try to intervene on behalf of their children to keep them from suffering the natural consequences of their inappropriate behavior. Far too few parents understand that suffering the consequences of inappropriate behavior is necessary in order for positive change to occur. More parents need to allow their children to participate in the luxury of being punished when a wrong has been done or an expectation not met.

At Northside High School it was absolutely determined that arbitrary criteria would not be permitted to influence the administration of consequences. Therefore, children of the rich and poor, black and white, Protestant and Jew were punished in the same way for the same remission. Also children of the influential were treated the same as children of the powerless. The legislator's, principal's, mayor's, and entrepreneur's children were treated the same as the welfare mother's child.

PROCESS MODEL FOR CHANGE

Expectations <-----> Consequences

EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENT

In order to illustrate how this model works, I will examine how we eliminated drug use on campus by employing this model.

The student handbook clearly states that what is illegal outside of school is also illegal inside of school and that the

consequences in all cases for someone who breaks the law is to be referred to the criminal justice system (arrested).

If a student, or adult for that matter, is found to be in possession of a controlled substance, the police will be called and an arrest made. It really is rather simple! Within one and one-half years we all but eliminated drug use on campus. The expectation was not to possess drugs; the consequence for doing so was arrest, and it was equitably administered so that all offenders regardless of their parentage or circumstance were arrested.

While this process is simple, it only addresses the issue of on-campus drug possession. What about the far greater problem of drug use off campus? Here is where someone other than educators have to accept responsibility. In our case it was a group of dedicated parents who organized and set out to regain control of their children and to assist in a community-wide project designed to educate adults about teens and drugs.

The parents formed parent-peer groups and had many community meetings in which law enforcement, judges, clergy and physicians all participated. Each group enhanced the other's knowledge of teens and drugs. These meetings were well attended and addressed the issues of drug education, and parenting. Efforts were made to have the different agencies in the community familiarize themselves with each other and to be aware of the parents' willingness to help.

These efforts were successful in many areas. Our parents worked directly with the medical community in an effort to raise physicians' (particularly pediatricians) consciousness in the area of teenage-drug use and abuse. In fact, the most prestigious hospital in Atlanta co-sponsored with our parents a workshop for staff physicians

on the topic of teens and drugs. The physicians were so impressed that they devoted an entire issue of Atlanta Medicine to "Adolescent Drug Abuse."

In addition to the medical community, the parents also worked with the mayor's office and the chief of police in an effort to "clean-up" the local concert halls where drugs were commonly used during rock concerts. Their collective efforts resulted in a crack down at concerts which served to eliminate most drug use in the halls.

Political pressure was also applied to our state legislature and our parents lobbying resulted in legislation which prohibits paraphernalia shops in the State of Georgia. This legislation has withstood a constitutional challenge and serves as a model to other states.

Another major effect of our parent groups was the direct assistance they offered to the school. Parents helped design and implement a pupil accounting system that resulted in reduced class cuts and increased student attendance. They were also a major force in offering our teachers in-service education on teenage drug abuse and were instrumental in our school's decisions to update our drug prevention curriculum.

Drug abuse was only one of the issues with which our parents helped. They also expressed concern over other "teen-parent" issues such as depression, suicide, curfews, divorce, etc. In addressing these concerns, they joined hands with several other parent groups in our community and formed a consortium of parent groups to deal with these issues.

Their collective efforts resulted in the publication of a book entitled "The Family Connection," which has enjoyed widespread

acceptance within and without the communities which published it.

The energies of our parents were also directed to the school by providing support for our Famous-Speakers program. With their assistance and the able efforts of staff, we have enjoyed hosting many nationally known people such as Nancy Reagan, Senator Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson, Pat Conroy, Jean-Michele Cousteau, and President Reagan, to name a few. This program has significantly enriched our academic program.

Obviously much of what we have done in the way of innovation and programs has been left out of this paper. It is important, however, to understand that our accomplishments are not attributable to programs but process.

The process of change and of parent-school cooperation in a non-blaming relationship are essentially responsible for the changes that we have made. This process has allowed the school to raise its expectations of students, staff, and parents to the end of improved academic performance.

It should also be mentioned that our accomplishments were made within the allotted financial resources of our school district. We never sought additional funds and would encourage others to implement change without seeking funds above and beyond those allocated within a local school district. Even our parent groups operated on minimal budgets funded from their own limited pockets. That is not to say, however, that neither the school or parents did not use existing community resources. We found existing agencies and resources not only plentiful but also competent and willing to serve.